

Understanding

Sexual Abuse Investigations in Day Care



**State of Michigan
Department of Human Services**

Office of Children and Adult Licensing

www.michigan.gov/dhs

Preface

We would all like to believe that our children will be safe from sexual abuse, but the cold reality is that such abuse is a ***pervasive social problem*** that may affect as many as one out of three girls and one out of seven boys before he/she reaches the age of eighteen. As a social problem, child sexual abuse cuts across all *ethnic, religious, and economic lines*.

An **investigation** of alleged sexual abuse is a particularly **stressful** time for those parents and the child who are involved. The Division of Child Care Licensing has prepared the following information which should explain some basic concerns parents have about investigations.

During a licensing investigation, it is possible that **not all parents will be contacted** even though additional children may have been sexually abused. Because the Division is limited in its ability to work with families, the following information should answer many of your questions about abuse and the investigation process.

Division licensing staff are not therapists and seldom are able to fully discuss the impact of sexual abuse with parents.

It is hoped that through the following information you will gain some clear **ideas** on the nature and effects of child sexual abuse and will be assisted in knowing how to better **respond** to your child and family.

Here are some of the most commonly asked questions from parents whose children have made allegations of sexual abuse or whose children are involved in an abuse investigation.

1. Do children make up the allegations of sexual abuse?

On **rare** occasions children have been known to make up accusations of sexual abuse. Those who do are usually older children who have some clear reason for doing so. Information in professional literature and the experience of workers in the field have indicated that *young children rarely lie* about having been sexually abused.

However, the way in which children tell about abusive situations often leads adults to think that the children are making up or imagining these acts. **Children often delay** in telling about sexual abuse. The result is that they may experience many acts of abuse over time before they confide in an adult. Or, there may be a significant time gap between the act of abuse and the disclosure. For these reasons children's disclosure is often vague or confused and therefore seems unconvincing. It may require many occasions of talking with a child to determine exactly the nature of the abuse. It is also very common for children to recant their disclosures and then tell the adult that what they have said about the abuse is not true. Professionals who work with sexually abused children recognize this behavior as typical of children who have been pressured into keeping something secret. It is **not** that they are telling lies or imagining events.



2. Will all children be traumatized by sexual abuse?

Fortunately, not all children are traumatized by sexual abuse, and both experience and research have consistently demonstrated that a *warm, protective, and supportive family environment* is one of the best defenses against a traumatic reaction.

Some children will, however, develop **symptoms** that may interfere with normal, healthy growth and routines. Research and experience have shown that children under five may show *regressive behaviors*, such as bed wetting, soiling, thumb-sucking, or clinging behavior. They may develop *fears*, both of things and of people; and may must repeat the sexual abuse in play, in drawings, and in conversations with adults and peers.

Children over five may be more inclined to develop behavioral problems that may include *depression* and/or *withdrawal* on one end of the continuum, to *aggressive* or antisocial acting out on the other end. Children this age, too, very frequently repeat the sexual abuse in play, in drawings, and in conversations with adults and peers.

Some children show *few* outward **symptoms**, but may still have deep **concern** and **confusion**. Other children may continue to say that they like the person who is alleged to have abused them. It would be easy to conclude that these children are not being truthful about the allegation, or that the sexual abuse was not in any way harmful in its impact. But again, research and experience have both demonstrated that these responses **are to be expected** in some children, and should ***never*** be used as a standard by which to judge the children's truthfulness, or the impact of the abuse has had on them.



3. Should children who allege to have been sexually abused receive professional counseling?

Sexual abuse is a *confusing* and often *frightening* behavior for a child to experience. It is **all** of those things **and more** for the parents of the child. Therefore, it is often advisable for the family to receive professional counseling and guidance from a trained and objective third party. **Counseling is strongly recommended** for children who are demonstrating symptoms that suggest that they have a great number of powerful feelings to work through.

Many adults would like to believe that if a child is simply left alone, he or she will forget about the abuse. **This is rarely true.** Although some children may cease to talk about the abuse, their silence does not allow them the opportunity to put the abuse into perspective or allow them a chance to address their feelings about the abuse. Regardless of whether or not parents take their children for professional counseling, it is recommended that **all** parents talk to their children in a calm, reassuring manner about what allegedly happened to them. **Keep talking and keep listening** each and every time the child feels a need to share his or her feelings and concerns. *It is important to continually reassure the child that the incident was not the child's fault.*



4. Will children be traumatized by being interviewed by various professionals who will investigate the allegation of sexual abuse?

Professionals who work in the area of child sexual abuse are well aware that *prolonged* and *repeated interviewing* of children can be **stressful** for them and their parents. Every attempt will be made to keep interviews to a minimum both in time and in number but parents need to understand that because of childrens' tendency for *delayed, unconvincing, and recanted disclosures*, it may be necessary to interview children more than once.

Parents can help the professionals involved by **jotting down** any statements which their children make about the abuse and by **recording** any *physical, emotional, or behavioral changes* that they notice in their children which may be reactions to the abuse.



5. Can children who have been sexually abused lead normal, healthy lives?

Fortunately, children who have been sexually abused **can** and **do** lead **healthy, normal lives**. Many require professional counseling, and **all** need a supportive, caring family environment to help them through the initial effect of the abuse and later reactions to it.



We hope this information helps answer some of your questions. We encourage you to contact your Division of Child Day Care Licensing consultant with any additional concerns or information you may need. We will be more than happy to assist you. Contact the Department of Human Services, Office of Children and Adult Licensing for the licensing consultant closest to you!

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